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Introduction: Shakespeare in Cross-Cultural Spaces

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Robert Sawyer and Varsha Panjwani

Introduction: Shakespeare in Cross-Cultural Spaces

The seeds for this volume were planted in the fertile soil of Guimarães, Portugal, during a colloquium organized by Francesca Rayner and the Centre for Humanistic Studies of the Universidade do Minho in October 2015, where scholars presented papers on the subject of “Shakespearean Collaborations.” Two themes emerged across many of the papers: the intercultural negotiation through Shakespeare and the consideration of spatial studies of Shakespeare. These ideas, germinated in Portugal, were then cross-pollinated with similar topics by other multinational Shakespearean scholars for this special issue on “Shakespeare in Cross-Cultural Spaces.”

As we worked on this issue through 2016, the significance of discussing our first theme of cross-cultural relations became increasingly urgent. While, on the one hand, the world was marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, on the other hand, political and cultural borders were being re-imagined and re-made: the United Kingdom voted to exit from the European Union, the mass-migration of refugees from war-torn countries such as Iraq, Syria and Libya continued to increase, and the U.S. president, Donald Trump, threatened to build a wall across the Mexican border during his campaign. It seemed that the currents of Shakespeare studies and performance, which were celebrating diversity and interculturalism as witnessed by publications such as *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard* (2016) and productions such as Royal Shakespeare Company’s *Hamlet* with the Black actor, Paapa Essiedu, in the lead role (both reviewed in this issue), were moving in the opposite direction to these international events. This disconnect became amply clear when an American Shakespeare academic, Paul Hamilton, was deported despite having spent nine years studying and teaching in the U.K. Therefore, we chose the term “cross-cultural” due to the different meanings it offers—it could simply mean correlation and comparison between different cultures; it could denote something that transcends cultural differences and “goes across” them; it could stand for an intersection, a cross-roads, where different cultures, like different roads, meet briefly before diverging again; equally, it has connotations of conflict and could mean cultures that are adverse to or at cross-purposes with each other.

The renewed interest in space (instead of, say, time) in Shakespeare studies, our second theme, is demonstrated by the number of recent conference presentations and publications concentrating on the subject, including more than twenty sessions on the “spatial turn” in literary studies for the Modern Language Association annual meeting in 2017. A dozen recent monographs on the topic have also been published, including, but not limited to the following: *Shakespeare’s Staged Spaces and Playgoers’ Perceptions* (2014), *Shakespeare and Space: Theatrical Explorations of the Spatial Paradigm* (2016); *Intermedial Shakespeares on European Stages* (2014) and *Theatre’s Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space* (2014). Numerous writers in this volume add to this emerging focus, some based on Henri Lefebvre’s ideas of “produced” space, others on Garrett Sullivan’s seminal book, *The Drama of Landscape*.

We have organized the articles according to a plan which is as “vexed and variable” as the notion of cross-cultural Shakespeare itself, a point Christy Desmet notes in her review essay which begins our volume. While many of the entries are cross-hybrid examinations which break down our artificial boundaries of organization, such cross-overs should be expected, if not applauded. Our hope remains, however, that our division into four distinct areas—Performance, Politics, Popular Culture, and Place—will give readers some sense of the central focus of each contribution.

I. Performance

Rayner’s essay looks at two Portuguese performances of Shakespeare that encouraged greater participation from their audiences in order not only to create and maintain new audiences for Shakespeare, but also to counter democratic entrenchment in Europe. A de-hierarchization of performance space, Rayner argues, enabled Russian, Dutch, English and Japanese elements to appear within an expanded notion of what constitutes contemporary Shakespearean performance in Portugal.

Looking carefully at current intercultural Shakespeare performances within the physical borders of the U.K., Varsha Panjwani’s contribution details how people of mixed-heritage, specifically “Braisians” (her preferred term for British Asians), challenge the perceived gap or space between their multiple identities. She focuses on Brasian Shakespeare productions that demonstrate successful attempts at cross-fertilization of elements from their plural heritage to create unique shows that emphasize their fused identities and question the very idea and definition of Britishness.

II. Politics

As both Rayner and Panjwani point out, politics is always “stitched” onto the very “fabric” of these cross-cultural productions, not unlike the Lady Macbeth outfit Panjwani details in *Darokhand*, a costume which included Hindu, Islamic, Scottish, and even gothic accoutrements. Such “cross-dressing” also suggests the crossing of national borders, a topic which becomes central in Maurizio Calbi’s contribution on John Akomfrah’s work, *The Nine Muses*. Referred to as “one of the most vital and original artistic responses to the subject of immigration that British cinema has ever produced,” the film takes BBC documentaries of the 1950s and the 1960s, and then layers them with both sound and narrative tracks from predominantly Western “canonical” literature. As Calbi concludes, such “border crossings” may demonstrate the way “Shakespeare” itself functions as an *undulating* signifier, an ensemble of fragments that lends itself to an infinite variety of “migrations”—what in current critical debates is often referred to as “global Shakespeare.”

Calbi also notes that Paul Robeson’s song “Let My People Go” is featured on the soundtrack of *Nine Muses*, and Robert Sawyer’s essay focuses entirely on this actor / activist. He argues that Robeson’s 1942 Broadway production of *Othello* was much more successful than his 1930 version in London due to his increasing global understanding and protests against injustices around the world, particularly in the fight against Franco’s fascism in Spain. In multiple venues, from concert halls, to dramatic theatres, to theatres of wars, to arenas of popular entertainment, Robeson’s voice of protest echoed loudly though the new sphere of global broadcasting.

III. Popular Culture

According to Maria Sequeira Mendes, Teatro Praga (an edgy, Portuguese dramatic company), stages protests of a different kind by rebelling against traditional Shakespeare, the type dismissively described by Peter Brook as “deadly theatre.” Mendes’s essay details how the company’s productions of *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* fight the fatigue of this performance tradition by irreverently mixing Shakespeare and Henry Purcell with popular cultural genres such as rap music and reality television. Teatro Praga’s adaptations, therefore, seem to exist in a liminal location which, according to Mendes, might be described as “intercultural” as *inter* has connotations of something “among, amid, in between, in the midst” and these performances mediate between Shakespeare’s plays and the “way they have been discussed, quoted, and misquoted across time.” In Teatro Praga’s staging of both plays, “the cultural capital that derives from the Bard is considered as relevant as the

plays themselves.” Mendes argues that these productions reframe “Shakespeare’s intercultural legacy” and, in turn, “reinforce” his appeal.

Another testament to Shakespeare’s cross-over presence in popular culture genres emerges in Darlena Ciraulo’s essay which focuses on *Johnny Hamlet* (1968)—an Italian, Spaghetti Western. While international distributors downplayed the movie’s highbrow credentials, Ciraulo details how the director Enzo G. Castellari draws equally on the conventions of the *western all’italiana* as well as Shakespeare’s characterization of the broody prince. She draws attention to the way in which these Italian Westerns can be seen as an intercultural art form: “Filmed largely in Italy and Spain, Spaghetti Westerns frequently drew on the cinematic talents of Italo-Spanish directors and producers, as well as European and North America artists, to generate action-filled Westerns.” *Johnny Hamlet* captures the cross-cultural spirit of the genre as “Elsinore castle transmutes into Ranch Elsinor. The nation of Denmark is restyled as Danark, Texas; the threat of Fortinbras turns into the threat of Mexican outlaws; the tragic events in Scandinavia transpire in the mythic context of the wild Old West.”

IV. Place

Of all the subdivisions of cross-cultural space in our volume, the term “Place” seems to occupy a majority of the essays which confirms Desmet’s contention that when “we talk of cross-cultural ‘spaces’ in the lexicon of Shakespeare’s plays,” it seems “closer to the way he uses the word “place.” For instance, whereas Ciraulo’s essay takes us to Ranch Elsinor, Anne Sophie Refskou’s essay returns us to an actual castle in Elsinore, Denmark—the Kronborg castle. This last cluster of essays looks at both the spatial and specific locales of Shakespearean productions and appropriations.

Refskou draws attention to the fact that Kronborg Castle in the Danish town of Elsinore is increasingly being rebranded as “Hamlet’s Castle.” In 2016, Refskou curated a touring exhibition, “Hamlet at Elsinore 1816-2016” which uncovered the rich and transnational performance tradition at Kronborg. The most recent company to visit the castle was “Globe to Globe” which toured its production of *Hamlet* to 197 countries from 2014 to 2016 and performed at Kronborg on 21 April 2016, further attesting to the castle’s significance in the context of international Shakespeare performance. However, Kronborg’s connection with global Shakespeare still has to “co-exist with more local—and sometimes nationalistically inflected—interests in the space” (a trend Richard Burt, borrowing from a business-related theme, has termed the “glocalization” of Shakespeare). Refskou deftly explores how the identity of the castle has been

shaped and reshaped by its Shakespearean connection and wonders how this identity will develop within the context of post-Brexit nationalism.

Jose Manuel González's essay mirrors Refskou's, as it, too, discusses a liminal place, but unlike Refskou's piece, the emphasis is not on a land-bound geographical location. Instead, González examines the imaginary islands in the works of Cervantes, Fletcher and Shakespeare. While other essays in this volume concentrate on the way in which Shakespeare has been/is being deployed for negotiating cross-cultural relationships, González turns this preoccupation on its head to discuss how Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Fletcher, used the ever-enchanted space of islands in their work to "articulate perspectives on the shifting relationship between self and other, center and periphery," in the continual search for a stable space in which to forge an equally stable identity.

Shakespeare, and particularly *Hamlet's*, contribution to forging a national Germanic identity is explored in Thomas Kullmann's essay. He offers a fresh reading of Goethe's 1795 novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, in which the protagonist, Wilhelm, mounts a theatrical production of *Hamlet*. Kullmann argues that both Wilhelm and, by extension, Goethe, recruit Shakespeare to "rebel against what was felt to be French cultural dominance." Like Refskou's essay, Kullmann, too, looks at the "Globe to Globe" *Hamlet*, and he concludes his contribution by wondering whether this project, like Wilhelm's and Goethe's, can still employ Shakespeare to "break boundaries" and "push back borders", or, conversely, has Shakespeare's acceptance as a global icon blunted his once subversive and emancipatory potential to re-place former identities with new ones.

The final essay in the collection emphasizes space and place in numerous ways. Diana Henderson chronicles her participation in a six-night run of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (the project's official title, *The Merchant in Venice*) performed in the main Campo del Ghetto Nuovo, the site of the Jewish Ghetto that gave the world that word. After detailing the difficulties of conveying such event-focused performances across time and media, she laments that our "vocabularies for describing space and place encourage illusory notions of return" to a vision of either the early modern period or of Shakespeare's place in it. She concludes by highlighting the "scholarly responsibility to be aware" that our own work is intercultural in nature, in the sense that when we critique productions, we too are crossing professional boundaries, as we translate between an artist's aesthetic production and our own discursive condition.

While the essays in this volume were composed only recently, the ideas we consider stretch back to Shakespeare's own awareness of cross-cultural concerns and transnational issues; we need look no further for evidence of this than the name his company chose for their most important playing space called, simply enough, The Globe. It is no accident, as Richard Wilson (2016), Alexa Huang (2013) and others have observed that this was also the period when most

physical globes were produced for the growing market interested in both terra firma locales and literary landmarks in the plays of Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries. In short, our volume does not only reflect recent trends in literary studies, but also continues to trace the path of Shakespeare's globalization begun while Queen Elizabeth was still directing traffic, overseeing trade, and supporting dramatic productions, which, as often as not, reflected such cross-cultural commerce.

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